

Documents on Diplomacy: The Source

Report of Bonvouloir to the Count of Guines 1775

Philadelphia 28 December 1775

I have found, as I expected, the country in an inconceivable state of agitation. The confederates make high preparations for next spring, and despite the rigor of the season, they continue the campaign. They besieged Montreal, which capitulated, and are actually before Quebec, which, I think, will also do so soon. They have seized some of the King's ships loaded with provisions of war and food. They are perfectly entrenched before Boston. They have made a small navy; they have an incredible ardor and will. It is true that they are led by clear heads. They lack three things: A good navy; War material; Money.

They agree with me. I am going to recount word for word three particular conversations which I have had with Mr. Franklin and three other clear heads who compose the secret council. I entered in particular into their intimacy through the route of an honest Frenchman, of whom I am sure, and who has acquired a good share in the confidence of the deputies. This Frenchman is named Daymons. I recommend him to you. He is a bookseller in the city. Everything you wish to send reaches me at my address, and my packets will be marked A.B. and turned over to me.

I have made them no offer. . . . They are but five in the private council of which I will tell you the names at the end of my letter. Everything they do is well done, and has the force without the sanction of the congress which is very numerous and where one can slip because of false friends. They discovered one recently who escaped punishment by fleeing. I have often had individual interviews with them. Each comes in obscurity by different routes. . . . They gave me their confidence after I said that I neither promise, receive, nor offer anything, and have advised them many times that I appear as an individual unpaid volunteer.

Here is the result of our interviews, with acquaintances, the same as those who will appear later, and the state of their affairs, without asking me to whom nor how nor where I address myself, regarding me as a private individual in whom they have confidence.

Their affairs are in a good state, and I am sure, having these emissaries from more than one place who instructed me without pay. They hope to open the campaign successfully, and I am going to know the instant that the savages of the Five Nations have sent their chiefs to a special assembly in order to assure them that they will be neutral, but if circumstances require, they will take up arms for the Americans; they are powerful, feared, and have each earned his present power. Lord Dunmore, commandant in Virginia, has succeeded in making a rather considerable party; he had published a proclamation freeing the slaves, he had seized Norfolk already and had fortified it. The Virginians, aided by some companies of militia from the Carolinas, have fought him three different times, have taken Norfolk, razed the fortifications and obliged Dunmore to withdraw to the King's vessels, ten or twelve miles from the city, where they are going to attack him if the ice permits.

The royalists took the road to New York to blockade it. General Lee brought up five thousand men.

They are persuaded that they won't be able to hold it without a nation which protects them by sea; that only two powers are in a position to provide their security, France and Spain, but they can see the difference of one and the other. I have made them aware of the superiority in all things, that the King, my master, has over Spain, and they are convinced of it. They are resolved, I think, perhaps for a long time, to complain to His Majesty; but I caught a glimpse that they want to delay the opening of the campaign, because in this country, many people still hold to the King who has not done them enough wrong. They see perhaps with anxiety a foreign nation meddling in their affairs. They want to gain their aspirations and to feel that each earned his present power; in this I think they are prudent. They expect to have their cities destroyed and their houses burned, which will succeed in making them abhor the leopards. They have sent, without my advice, a brigantine to Nantes named *John* or *Saint Jean*, Captain Charles Forest, addressed to Mr. Jean-Daniel Schweighauser. This vessel will carry my letter. I put on board myself a man of whom I am sure, besides that I will find some other way to write to you; but it is important that not a word escapes you. Here are the demands they ask me to present to you on their behalf. The vessel is loaded with grain and other products of the country, which they want to exchange for other products; as the cargo of imports will perhaps exceed that of export, they ask that they may make substitutes which will permit them to take the excess to Santo Domingo, to persons whom they will designate and receive payment in commodities of the country. . . . If there would be the means to pass the same kind of merchandise to different parts of Santo Domingo, my correspondents are going to look there at their peril and risk; they want two men capable of building fortifications. If it happens, they will look for them at Cap Francois—which is the safest route for them to reach here—because if by bad luck they are taken, they will risk nothing, the inhabitants of these hot places are coming often here to recover their health. Here in order to present their demands bearing the expenses themselves they ask me to make them known to my acquaintances. I offered them my small talents for engineering, but I cannot remain sedentary, and am obliged to run about all the time.

You will receive my news as often as possible, and I will let you know by letter all that happens. There are some so persuaded of the good will of France toward them that they have asked me, if I had some good connections, to bring them abreast of what concerns them, I have promised this without anything more.

If you judge it proper, expedite our ship as soon as is convenient. Time is short. My messenger has orders, in case of pursuit, going and coming, to throw the papers in the sea. You can in complete security send me a response by him to the address marked on my letter. I ask you, on my behalf; to write to M. Buffon, broker in Le Havre, in order to claim two

trunks which ought to have been sent to his address; they are precious to me, for this country is expensive, and I have no money to spare. If you can recover them, do so, I beg you, put them on the way to Nantes at the address of M. Tessier, broker at Nantes and my correspondent, who will load them. If they are not at Le Havre, write to Chevalier de B. asking him to look for them promptly. I will tell you that M. Daymons will be receiving a letter from M. Pie Depere, of whom I had the honor to speak to you in Europe, dated at Fort Dauphin, which announces to him four cargoes of merchandise. I have the honor to repeat to you that I have advanced nothing, neither am I guaranteed anything, anything at all; They have much confidence in me, and I penetrated all that is most secret. They ask nothing of me neither as to whom nor where I address myself in any way.

Everyone here is a soldier. The troops are well clothed, well paid and well led. They have 50,000 men on the payroll and a considerable number more of volunteers who do not need pay. Judge how men of this character will fight. Send me a response as soon as possible in order to expedite the vessel and try to retrieve my trunks. I trust the one who carries my letter—otherwise I would not write you so openly. You may write to me with full confidence in him. He is on the ship as passenger. I thought of going myself to inform you, but I did not dare. Send me a response to all the points in my letter, and an instruction to guide me, for the matters are so delicate that with all the good will possible, I tremble as I walk; but I will proceed because time is pressing. I have told them nothing to lead them to believe that I have correspondence with the minister; and I behave as an individual at times, but I believe, and I have strong proof, that they suspect that I come in the winter directly from Antwerp only for strong reasons. They have more confidence in me and show regard and could not be more faltering. I am going to send the text of a small note that the private counsel sent me this morning for Daymons, a reliable man who is singularly useful to me. I have made the response that you will see, after having told them what had happened in detail and been asked to communicate their doubts and to clarify for them as best a man possibly can who is neither engaged nor familiar with the affairs of state.

I know that the most secret transactions and deliberations are communicated to me and, in flattering them and leading them a little by the hand, I can do what you wish. They have all told me that they fight in order to be free and that they are tied by oath and they would be cut to pieces rather than give up. They well knew they could not support themselves by sea and that only France is capable of protecting their commerce, without which their country will never flourish; that they ignore if, should it come to proposals, France would be content to have with them during a limited time, an exclusive trade in order to pay back the expenses which their cause required, that they would not be paying for mere neutrality, as with a little help in case of war between two nations and an inviolable attachment, something which they will never lack.

I have replied that does not concern me, that they were prudent and

wise, that they discuss interests, but when one asks does one always follow the law. They are more powerful than one thinks; it surpasses the imagination and you in turn, may be surprised. Nothing frightens them, be assured of that. The rumor circulates that two French officers arrived at camp, charged to make some proposals. They ask what I believe in. I respond that I know nothing, that it seems strange to me, that France was very powerful, and that far from offering, she does not always accord what is asked of her.

You will know all that happens, and never any false advice on my part. Combine your wishes about my letters. I repeat to you that my man is reliable. He is a passenger on the ship. I have made no indiscretions and all is covered by a veil of impenetrable secrecy.

No one will ever enter into my trust. I will keep you abreast of all the deliberations that I know of, but actually one discusses only the means of procuring the munitions.

I have been a long time without writing to you. This is not my fault. I had a terrible passage. I have been 100 days at sea. I thought we would perish twenty times. I was reduced to two worm-eaten and spoiled biscuits a day, a little salted beef, a little disgusting water in small quantities and nothing more, and taking on more than 40 tons of water every 24 hours. Take care of the places underlined in my letter.

If the ship returns loaded, you will do me a great service to order, if it is without danger, ten or twelve bales of merchandise with the letters AB. That would be a great help here and not a great cost. I am obliged to pay the expense, and I can spare the money. I will write often by Santo Domingo where I have a reliable man and my intimate friend. I do my best, and I will be very unlucky if I do not satisfy you. You know my attachment for you and you need not doubt I will be for the rest of my life,

Your humble and respectful servant,

P.S. I have just learned that the royalists little by little evacuate Boston where they have their food supplies for only a month and are not able to receive more. Everything is intercepted and the inhabitants as are the troops are reduced to a dreadful plight. If you could do me the pleasure of sending me a study of mathematics with a treatment of fortifications and the attack and defense of places by M. de vauban, which I need and cannot find here. I work day and night, very happy if I succeed. I begin to speak English pretty well.

Here is the note I mentioned I would report to you. . . .

I just learned a few moments ago that they [the colonists] have taken two transport vessels richly laden, but also they have also lost one of their corsairs. They will have by the month of April more than thirty ships armed with from 40 guns to 12. They have left the English flag, and they have taken for arms a serpent with 13 bells, and an armed arm of 13 arrows in order to represent the thirteen united provinces of the continent. The royalists have sent American prisoners to London. General Washington,

who has sent an agent to redeem them, having received a very hard reply, has published it that, if anything bad happens to the prisoners, reprisals will be taken against the close to three thousand English prisoners whom they hold, among them many officers, and they are convinced that as I understand, that if this happens, one will do nothing bad to the English prisoners, but that they will put off until later what will happen to the unfortunate. . . . This to a good effect. Boston is under siege. You will receive two letters from me but by two different ships which go to France without my notice. They told me that they regard me as a man who came in order to help them, but that if I could not render such a service, I would be acquainted with some businessmen and that they would be grateful and consider me as one of their members. I know all this by a good emissary, and of whom I cannot pass. One asks me today if I have acquaintances at Miquelon. I said no. They have had a strong desire to pass some provisions, because they have many facilities for what we seek.

Here are the names of the savages who have sent their chiefs to the assembly and formed an alliance with the Americans: The Tuscarons, the Onondagas, the Senecas, the Mohawks, the Cayugas.

Here are the names of the secret council [members] who decide every

thing without the participation of the rest of the congress: Franklin, Harrison, Johnson, Dickinson, Jay.

In folding my letter the paper is a little torn. Do not be uneasy about that. I am confident of my man. There arrived here yesterday two Frenchmen leading a large train which they say carried a good provision of powder. I did not write you about the two vessels which came from Europe and of which I speak to you. I believed that it is useless, having nothing further to report.

The name of the brigantine is *Saint-Jean*, the captain is Charles Forest, and the addressee: Jean-Daniel Schweighauser.

Another will depart for the same port within twelve days, and I will write you by him. If this succeeds, all will come out as one wishes. ■

Source

French Covert Action in the American Revolution, Written by James M. Potts, Appendix A; Lincoln: 2005

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